

Built and Burned by the Railroad: Coolidge, Hamilton County, Kansas, 1872-1910



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In this study I will talk about the rise and fall of the once great Kansas town Coolidge in extreme western Kansas, Hamilton County. Throughout this research paper I will use an interview, early town maps, railway maps, and also photographs that I captured myself while on site. By the end of this study you will have a good idea as to why Coolidge no long persists as well as other interesting facts.

Dust in the Wind

If a bypasser were to drive through the town of Coolidge, Kansas, he would think nothing more of it than a diminishing community. Yet seeing the town as it is now, and passing judgment, is not fair. This end of the line town is now home to 93 residents but once flourished with upwards of 1,500 people. Huge declines in interest and support have seen this once great Kansas town slowly become another name on the list of future Kansas ghost towns. Before this town was given the name of Coolidge, in the 1880s, the local rural people knew this area as Sargent. On February 7, 1886, Coolidge became Hamilton County's first incorporated city.

Railway Beginning

Coolidge was discovered and established in 1880 by the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, and therefore got its name from the former President of the company, Mr. Thomas Jefferson Coolidge. This small community is located two miles from the Colorado and Kansas border in Hamilton County on the edge of western Kansas. It is nestled along the outer banks of the mighty Arkansas River. The Santé Fe railroad runs directly through the town of Coolidge, making it a foundation for this town to grow and expand, as the railroad base of operations was housed in the town.

The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad was one of the first factors that aided present day county seat Syracuse in growing in the late 1870s. When the railroad decided it wanted to expand westward into Colorado, it began looking for a plot of land for its base of operations until the company had the necessary equipment to expand across the state line. They discovered the establishment of what was once Sargent and soon to be, Coolidge. It was an absolute perfect location, as track already extended there.

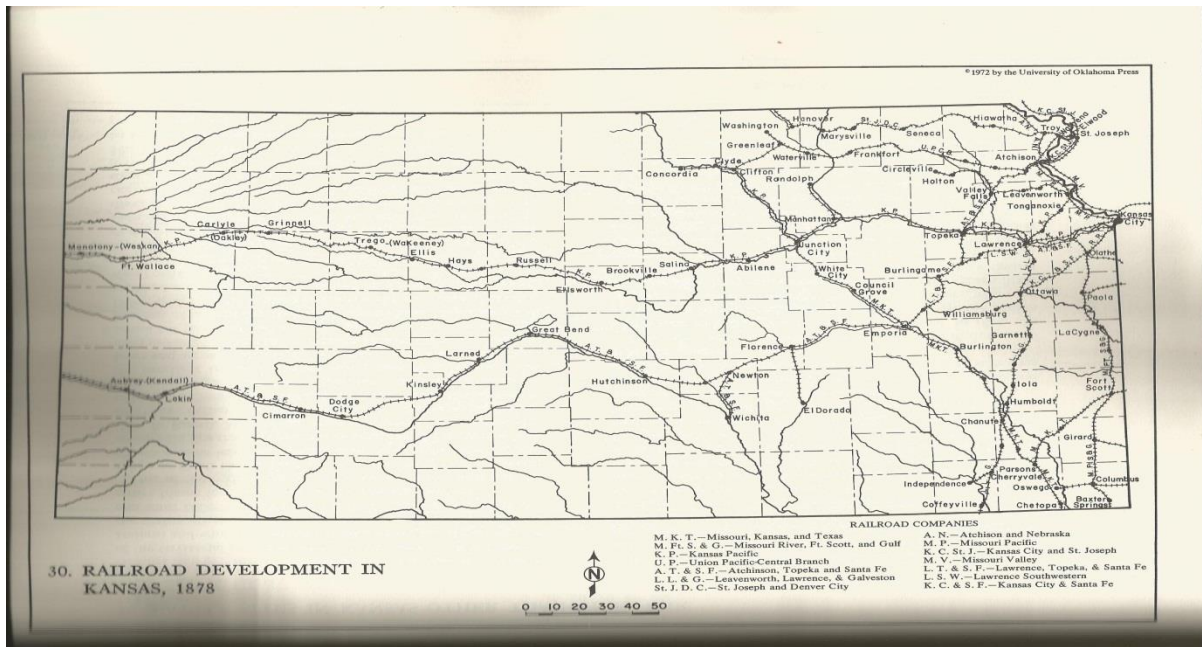


Figure 1¹. Above is a railroad development map that shows the westward movement that occurred in Kansas in the late 1870s. As you see here, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santé Fe Railway had begun to develop itself through Coolidge, but stopped at the border.

Trail City

Martin S. Culver and the cattle trail came into this area and settled in a town known as Trail City during its three-year existence. Trail City was located right across the border in Colorado. It was two miles from Coolidge and acted as its brother city, in its short time as a settlement. Trail City was known as “the wickedest city in Colorado.”² There was a lot of criminal activity and no law enforcement in place along the border. When an officer tried to arrest an outlaw, he could easily escape by crossing into Colorado from Kansas or vice versa in a few steps, out of

¹ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 30.

² Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson , *The Women of the West: Biography and Autobiography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 1987.

the jurisdiction. This was made possible, as the town and its Main Street butted up against the Kansas border, but did not cross the line, so it was considered a Colorado community.

Martin S. Culver, even though he resided in Trail City, still had a great deal of authority and respect in Coolidge. He was elected as the town treasurer of Coolidge during the Kendall and Coolidge fight for the county seat in the 1887 election. Mr. Culver was very ill at the time of the election. His daughter also ran for an office in the 1887 election, but refused to run under her father. She was on the ballot as an Independent, and I believe that this was ultimately her downfall. Once the ballots were counted, she was not elected, but her father, Mr. Culver was. In the fall of 1887, Martin S. Culver passed away from the illness that had plagued him throughout the election.

The town of Trail City was devastated with the death of Culver and lost over 150 residents in a year's time. Within a year, Trail City no longer existed. Culver would have been disappointed in the disappearance of Trail City, as most of the people and businesses that were present soon moved to Coolidge. Businesses that relocated were even more popular in Coolidge, and from then on Coolidge began to bloom like a prairie cactus in the spring. In speaking with Coolidge historian Vicky Eads, she stated, "The people wanted Martin S. Culver to be buried in the Coolidge cemetery because of what he did for this community, even though to him it didn't seem like much at all."³ This showed how the community felt about Mr. Culver even after his death. Still today, people remember what he did for Coolidge and the forgotten Colorado town of Trail City.

³ Telephone interview with local Coolidge Historian, Mrs. Vicky Eads.



Figure 2.⁴ This is the tombstone and grave of Martin S. Culver who is buried in the Coolidge Cemetery north of town. Culver was the founder of Trail City, Colorado, and an elected official of Coolidge, Kansas, before his death in 1887. Photograph by author, March 16, 2013.

The Boom Years

The ATSF railroad used Coolidge as its unofficial base of operations. This created a need for saloons, stores, stables, and all of the typical services you would see in a western Kansas town in this period. Coolidge continued to sustain a population of approximately 400 people, marked by what the cattle trail brought to town and did not expand much further. Soon after, in 1881, that all changed when the railroad division point was moved from Old Granada in Colorado to Coolidge.⁵ Before the division arrived in Coolidge, the town consisted of a post office, several saloons, and a few shacks that housed railroad workers. By the year 1882, Coolidge had solidified itself as a major growing popular Kansas town.

⁴ Picture taken of Martin S. Culver grave located in the Coolidge public cemetery a mile and half north of the town of Coolidge. March 16, 2013.

⁵ City of Coolidge, *History of Coolidge, Kansas 1886-1986*, Holly Publishing Company, Holly, CO March 1986, p. 4.

Coolidge saw its major peak years or “Golden Age” from 1885-1887 with the population falling somewhere in the area of 900 to 1,200, according to most residential accounts.⁶ The railroad was an essential factor in this boom, having spent over \$350,000 on improvements in Coolidge, by the middle of 1887.⁷ The Harvey House was soon moved from Lakin to Coolidge to help provide food and housing to the 27 engine roundhouse that was placed in Coolidge. Soon after the Harvey House arrived, so did the other 100 other businesses and entrepreneurs that flooded into Coolidge in the following months. One of the first substantial buildings and businesses to be built in Coolidge was the Coolidge State Bank which opened its doors for business on April 26, 1886. Also built in 1885 was the first school.



Figure 3.⁸ This building was constructed in 1888 along what is now Highway 50 and was the home to the Coolidge State Bank, which moved here in that year. The stone architecture of this bank is very similar to what you see in many small town banks all over western Kansas, with a corner front entrance for protection. Photograph by author, March 16, 2013.

⁶ City of Coolidge, *History of Coolidge, Kansas 1886-1986*, p. 6

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Photograph of the old Coolidge State Bank that was built in 1888 to replace an earlier building. March 16, 2013.

The Beginning of the End

The end of Coolidge was nearing in the years 1888 to 1891. The rail lines had spurred the fast growth of other towns as well, especially the nearby competitor, Syracuse. Small construction projects were still ongoing, but the citizens could not deny that the pace of town growth had slowed dramatically. The business side was not much better as residents saw many businesses leaving and relocating into Syracuse. With the opening of Peck's Magnificent Opera House, July of 1888 became a big month for Coolidge. However, with Coolidge's apparent bad luck things soon went downhill. One short month later on August 25, 1888, that beautiful opera house building burned to the ground in a tragic fire.⁹ This broke the hearts of numerous residents, as many had thought the opera house could be the jump-start Coolidge needed to get its economy going again. This was soon to be one the many fires that Coolidge was to experience.

Coolidge citizens strived to stay positive that their town would remain lively and persist over the years. However, soon after on September 5, 1890, came what I believe was the final blow for the town. For years, the officials of Coolidge had been trying to increase the property taxes of the Santa Fe Railroad in order to help build the town's coffers. The railroad refused to give into the demand for a tax increase, and "the relationship between the two became a very dangerous one."¹⁰ One of the more comical stories from this dispute came when a group of Coolidge residents were fed up with the Santa Fe Railroad Company and vowed to get even.

⁹ Telephone interview with Vicki Eads, May 9, 2013.

¹⁰ Ibid.

They chained down a fully loaded locomotive to the tracks and would not allow it to proceed through the town unless the railroad began to pay the taxes. This angered the Santa Fe Railway Company, and they issued this statement to the town, “that they were transferring their records to La Junta and moving the main division point to nearby Syracuse.”¹¹ No one in town ever thought they would follow through with their threat, until September 5, 1890, when the threat became a reality. With these changes, some 500 employees were relocated out of Coolidge, as well as the ever so popular Harvey House. It was moved east, into the neighboring city of Syracuse, which today is the county seat of Hamilton County, Kansas.

The 1890s were a rough time for Coolidge, as fires burned nearly six blocks of this town. With the town already thinning due to the railroad departure, it did not need the help of Mother Nature or the border ruffians. With the old roundhouse and Harvey House both being burned down by the 1930s, it was starting to look bad that Coolidge would survive. Residents who were business owners had no one to sell their business to, and many were going bankrupt in a heartbeat. In their depressive state, many business owners thought if they burned their business and filed a claim with their insurance company, they would hopefully receive a payment and have the financial ability to move out of Coolidge. The town-wide fire in 1910 brought the once great town of Coolidge to its end. Two months after the fire, the population was less than 250, rapidly decreasing right in front of the remaining citizens’ eyes.¹²

¹¹ City of Coolidge, *History of Coolidge, Kansas, 1886 -1986*, p. 28.

¹² *Ibid.*

The End

Coolidge today is known as a small farming community. This reflects back to the time period 1910-1920, when the town started to diminish from its railroad days and the fire, and the remaining loyal citizens began to move out of town and into the country. Residents soon realized they could make a living from the fertile land in the area. The soil was perfect for growing the crops that they desired to farm, wheat, corn, and even sugar beets. Farming is what has kept this small town of 93 residents together after all of these years. When speaking with a Coolidge resident while doing onsite research, she stated, "This community is not a ghost town, but just a western Kansas town going through a slump."¹³ I found her comment very interesting. I was also told that there is a select group of people who are working to revive this once great Kansas town back to its glory. The dream to have a town that supports and drives its residents is still evident here in Coolidge, Kansas. It may seem a dusty little town now, but as history has shown, and as evidenced throughout this paper, never ever give up on a Coolidgite.

¹³ Anonymous Coolidge resident, informal interview, March 16, 2013.



Figure.4⁹ The photograph above depicts the Arkansas River just outside of Coolidge, during the years it was flowing at its highest. The river has provided farmers with many different opportunities for agriculture.

⁹ <http://ks.water.usgs.gov/pubs/reports/wrir.00-4079.html>.

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